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Why Covert Activities Are Sometimes Necessary

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The Central Intelligence Agency is not a popular institution. The outcry over involvement with the "contras" in Nicaragua is only the most current manifestation of this. The CIA may be slightly more popular than it was in the mid-1970s, since I probably would not have dared to write this article then, fearing the remonstrances of friends. By definition the CIA only gets negative press. It gets our attention when it exceeds the limits of its authority and someone who knows about it, typically a disenchanted employee, tells us so. Officially, the CIA cannot tell us what it does, good or bad. As we know, "the Central Intelligence Agency does not confirm or deny published reports, whether true, false, favorable, or unfavorable to the Agency or its personnel. The CIA does not publicly discuss its organization, its budget, or its personnel." The above is the stated public relations and press policy of the Agency.

If the older among the readers of this article think that news about the CIA is a recent phenomenon, they are right. The United States did not really have an organization like the CIA until the Second World War. The war-time organization, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), had an almost heroic image helping in the fight against fascism. However, we heard little about it until it was disbanded. Its successor, the CIA, was created in 1947 by the National Security Act, a law which pretty much defined our entire present-day national security apparatus, including the Department of Defense.

Even then, we still did not hear much about the Central Intelligence Agency. It was not until the mid-1960s when a few cautious books began to appear that it came strongly to our attention. Since that time the Agency has frequently been the object of public scrutiny.

There are times when it almost fades from sight, but at other times, as in the late 1960s in Vietnam, the mid-1970s in the Watergate scandal and domestic spying incidents, and most recently in Central America the initials "CIA" are before us daily in the news. These latter times have in common a tactical mistake, some clear exceeding of CIA authority, and someone on the inside "blowing the whistle." Negative image-building has become the full-time occupation of some former "insiders" like Philip Agee. In the Third World and the Socialist bloc negative comments about the CIA are even more plentiful, sometimes when it is not even around; it has become a generalized symbol of American intervention in other countries. Since the CIA is not going to rise publicly to its own defense, can anything be said on its behalf?

Critics wonder whether we even need the Agency since, with the exception of an occasional spy or dabbling in military field intelligence, we got along without anything like it until the Second World War. Yet there can be no doubt that the United States requires good intelligence information. We could get along without it in the past only because we were not much involved with the world beyond our borders. Where we did get involved, such as in our own hemisphere, our involvement was so one-sided and heavy-handed that intelligence was not considered necessary. We were not a major participant in Europe, where we would have met more of our military match and been under more threat. The Europeans developed intelligence bureaucracies before us. It was not until the rise of fascism and then Marxism-Leninism that Americans began to perceive the dedication and organization that enemy powers could possess. In this as in many other ways, the Second World War was a watershed for changing the American role in the world.

The expanded involvement of the United States in the world, the perception of a dangerous and dedicated enemy in the Soviet Union, and the responsibilities of the United States as a nuclear power made

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good intelligence essential. We certainly would not want to bring to bear the weight of our awesome military arsenal on the basis of bad or incomplete information about the intentions of some other nation.

Of course, we get good information from sources other than the CIA on some nations and some developments. This intelligence comes, as it always has, from diplomats stationed abroad and from scholarly articles by academic experts on the various regions of the world. In addition, modern technology has made possible aerial reconnaissance, spy satellites, and long-distance electronic eavesdropping. While not as passive and non-controversial as diplomats and scholars collecting intelligence, these new technologies and the bureaucracies that operate them have managed to remain relatively anonymous. The National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the Department of State, and the National Reconnaissance Office do not conjure up the same negative associations as does the CIA. It is a testimony to their success, in fact, that they do not conjure up any image at all for most Americans.

The very fact that there now are so many intelligence-collection agencies in place and such an overwhelming amount of raw information available means that other functions are required: coordinating the collection, digesting the information, and presenting it to policy-makers. These are the functions specifically named and given to the Central Intelligence Agency by the National Security Act of 1947. It is not primarily in the performance of these functions, it should be noted, that the CIA has gotten itself into trouble.

There is still another kind of information that may not be available through these other means of collection. Typically, this remaining category is information that is hidden intentionally, most often by a hostile power. Gathering it requires one of the oldest-known (and usually illegal) means of collection. We are speaking, of course, of clandestine collection, or espionage. The United States, along with most other nation-states, has always engaged in this activity. In our case, our needs were only sporadic before the Second World War and they were met in an *ad hoc* way.

Since it is not conventional to be open about espionage, the topic is not mentioned in the National Security Act of 1947. It was, however, placed in the CIA under an open-ended clause of the Act which said that the Agency could "perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security, as the National Security Council [part of the Executive Office of the President] may from time to time direct." Except for the targets of the espionage, such as KGB activity in the United States, even this activity does not raise extensive objection. Unless it is done ineptly, classic espionage does not get the CIA into significant domestic trouble.

But that same open-ended clause covered, it turned out, yet another kind of activity. It is not clear that this was the intention of the drafters of the National Security Act, or of the first President to try and oversee the CIA, Harry Truman. This additional activity has become known as *covert action*. The very name implies something more than the "passive" collection of information. It connotes acting, acting to influence the course of another political system. Since in our present world no political system wants to concede the validity of having its internal affairs affected by a foreign power, the influence attempt must be covert, or clandestine.

Nations used to try to influence one another by diplomacy, economic sanctions, or military action. Diplomacy and economic pressure continue, of course, but military action is now a less acceptable vehicle for influence than formerly because of the danger of escalation of the conflict, and because of the strong norms operating in the international system to protect the inviolability of national borders. Since high-intensity violence is out, a lower-intensity influence attempt becomes more important. We are talking here about

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guerrilla warfare, terrorism, subversion, support for strikes and political demonstrations, and the manipulation of news. There are units of the American armed forces that have expertise for guerrilla warfare, and at the other end of the scale, the Department of State and the United States Information Agency have some responsibilities for propaganda. Prior to the CIA, however, there was no existing bureaucracy to cover a broad range of covert activities. It was the logical candidate for such activity because it was already there collecting information, it had important contacts, and it had an open-ended charter.

Its covert action first intruded into American public consciousness over its involvement in the overthrow of a left-wing government in Guatemala in 1954. Even this took considerable time to filter into the public domain. As we all know, there have been many other cases since. Some were out of public view when they occurred; others became known almost immediately. Whenever they became known, they were largely disapproved of by American public opinion.

There are three critical questions that need to be asked to make proper judgments about the CIA's covert activities. Should the United States be involved in *any* attempts to influence directly another political system? If the validity of intervention is admitted, is the Central Intelligence Agency the bureaucracy that should be responsible for it? Finally, are there meaningful limits that can or should be set on covert influence attempts?

To satisfactorily answer these questions with due attention to moral and political concerns would require much more space than I have available. I would, however, like to suggest a few propositions. The United States already intervenes in many other nations directly by our economic policies. Terms for a loan, or the terms of trade, could hardly be more direct in their effects on foreign governments. Low-intensity involvement of various kinds is preferable to military invasion, if it accomplishes the goal desired. This judgment rests simply on measurement of costs in human lives and property. This would seem to leave room for certain covert activities.

As regards the suitability of the Central Intelligence Agency for performing the function of covert action, at the present time there is no alternative agency. It is certainly a function which should not be dispersed any more than it is. Given the need for secrecy in operation, control and responsibility are already hard enough to maintain. The Director of Central Intelligence could hardly be closer to the President, both in the physical and the organizational sense.

The explicit limits on the Agency's activities and the checks and Congressional oversight are better than they have been since the 1960s. The frequency of revelation about misuse and misdeed is testimony to the effectiveness of the checks and oversight if not to the secrecy with which such an agency operates. The approval of the President for covert action is now required, and the plans must be submitted to the Congressional oversight committees. The President's directive of last year forbidding political assassinations is absolutely critical. While the United States must consider national security interests the same as any other nation, we claim a certain code of morality for ourselves. Behavior outside of this code must be explicitly banned. If we do not do this, we have no grounds for condemning the actions of others.

The key question is whether we should intervene in the affairs of other nations at all. If the ideal of self-determination of peoples and juridical equality of all nations was universally upheld, the answer would clearly be no. However, this is not the international system under which the world is presently operating. The dominating principle of international politics is still one of national self-interest, and the behavior of nation-states follows from that principle. Dismantling the CIA is not going to change the international system. It will only put us at a serious disadvantage.